

# Gender Issues and Civic Education – the Discussion in Germany

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## Christian Boeser

### 1. Introduction

Gender is a fairly new category in the scientific discussion of civic education. Potential reasons for the long-lasting neglect of this topic are the low number of women in institutions of civic education, the strong influence of political science and the often used narrow concept of politics (cf., Oechsle 2000, 59-67).

Although nowadays hardly any anthologies or encyclopedias of recent date about civic education omit articles on gender-specific questions, the relevance of this topic in the scientific discussion is still low and the standard of research unsatisfactory. Furthermore, until now this discussion can seldom lean on its “own” research results. Only the most recent development shows that the pre-empirical investigation stage in this field is replaced by first empirical research (Kroll 2000; Boeser 2002).

### 2. Research Survey

This article aims at illustrating the state of discussion and research in Germany (see also Boeser 2000, 90-108). Therefore, the following will outline the theoretical and empirical studies of scientists who so far have concentrated on this topic: Dagmar Richter, Sibylle Reinhardt, Heidrun Hoppe, Karin Kroll and Christian Boeser.

## **2.1 Dagmar Richter: Gender Orientation as a Didactic Principle**

Since 1991 *Dagmar Richter* has been dealing with the importance of gender-specific socialization on civic education in various publications (see Richter 1991; 1996; 1997; 2000). The author especially focuses on two aspects:

- (a) she is the first who explicitly expresses the connection between civic education and gender-related differences in political participation;
- (b) she presents a sophisticated model of didactics appropriate for both genders.

Richter develops the provocative thesis that during their socialization girls are depoliticized (Richter 1996, 42). Reasons given for this are, e.g., stereotypes in capabilities and interests of both genders and gender-specific socialization processes in combination with gender-specific division of labor (ibid). The author describes the socialization process of girls and women as deficient, because current (political) socialization does not encourage and enable them strongly enough to become politically committed (ibid). Richter considers it a problem that women only choose forms of participation like citizens' action groups (which are limited in space and time) but stay away from parliamentary politics (ibid). That is why the competencies of girls and women should be extended. They should be encouraged to become politically involved.

In a recent contribution (Richter 2000) she claims gender orientation to be a didactic principle. According to this, Richter has developed a program of civic education suitable for both genders, in which she distinguishes between a meta level, a planning level and a process level. Richter states the importance of dealing with positions in a science theory and the analysis of gender relations in society, and furthermore, the purpose of civic education on the meta level. She gives critical theory, feminism and constructivism as theoretical reference points. Concerning the planning level, she demands an investigation of the following topics: gender-specific socialization of male and female pupils, theoretical aspects of education and learning, gender orientated contents, further vocational training of teachers and gender sensitive didactics and teaching methods (ibid, 198).

## **2.2 Sibylle Reinhardt: Gender-Specific Access to the World**

*Sibylle Reinhardt* deals with the planning level. The main thesis of her publications is the existence of gender-specific ways of access to the world, which are relevant for public lessons and strongly influence the outcome of civic education. She emphasizes the lack of valid empirical results on this, yet the existence of subjects preferred more by girls than by boys, and the results of other fields make her assume this (Reinhardt 1996). Reinhardt views these different ways of access to the world positively and concludes two specific suggestions. On the organizational level she proposes establishing an integrated subject called social sciences, which combines economical, sociological and political aspects (Reinhardt 1999). Concerning the didactic level she encourages combining

different ways of access to the world, especially the connection of moral dilemma with structures of society and political decisions. Her given definition of a moral dilemma is the rivalry of two competing moral values, so that the decision in favor of one of them would violate the other and therefore needed to be justified. The forced decision within the individual is supposed to equally touch the girls' and boys' lives and drive them to a confrontation with political topics (Reinhardt 1996, 62). The author demonstrates this approach via an industrialist's dilemma: she has instructions to export a chemical factory and is forced to consider moral aspects concerning the protection of the environment as well as her company's needs.

### **2.3 Heidrun Hoppe: Does School Depoliticize Girls?**

Similar to Richter, *Heidrun Hoppe* formulates the provocative thesis that civic education has a negative effect on the attitude of female students towards politics (Hoppe 2000, 166 f.). She criticizes that their needs and interests are neglected during classes. As an alternative, she proposes offering a subject-orientated didactics, which creates a connection between the students' lives and politics (see also Hoppe 1996). Results of her observations during attendance in two school classes confirm her position: if the lessons' topics were more closely related to the girls' everyday life, they would participate more actively in discussions. Hoppe also believes she has identified methodical preferences: work in groups would improve the activity of female students (Bittner; Hoppe 1998). Similar to Dagmar Richter, Hoppe claims that girls should be encouraged to engage in politics. Female pupils' self-confidence should be promoted through their realizing that their own point of view and strategies for problem-solving are relevant and qualified. Therefore a combination of rational and emotional ways of thinking should be promoted. The intuitive way of perception should be considered, e.g. the capability of putting oneself in somebody else's position. This method should also help boys enrich their perception (Hoppe 1996, 179). It also is important to clarify the connections between politics and one's own life. This could especially be achieved through taking subjectiv-orientated questions into consideration (ibid, 174 f.). Similar to Richter and Reinhardt, the essential goal of Hoppe's didactics is to widen the range of actions for both genders (Hoppe 1996, 168).

### **2.4 Karin Kroll: The Invisible Female Student**

Not only do *Karin Kroll's* contributions (e.g. Kroll 2000) consider the relevance of gender-specific aspects in civic education on a theoretical level, she also initiates empirical studies on the interaction and communication of female and male students. In her thesis Kroll (2000) analyses video documentation of four school lessons. Just like Reinhardt, the author criticizes the lack of scientific knowledge about gender differences in learning behavior and the according needs. Yet she

concludes, also due to her own results, that there are relevant differences in communication in interaction styles between female and male pupils. Kroll found that the active girls use female structures of communication to improve the outcome of the discussion (e.g. they refer to former contributions) (ibid, 312). Female students are guided by relationships, but they still remain factual. They neither avoid differences of opinion or conflicts, nor do they fear potential conflicts with the teacher (ibid, 313).

An interesting point of Kroll's results is that the teachers' lack of knowledge about gender-specific international patterns as well as stereotypes about gender-specific needs may lead to actually active female students becoming "invisible" during civic education. Kroll's examination did not find the reasons why many girls right from the start do not actively participate in the lessons. She suggests conducting in-depth interviews with individual female students or in groups (ibid, 313). Beside this, Kroll presents another important result: The analysis of a school lesson, which dealt with abortion, showed that the hypothesis that the motivation of girls depends on how close topics are to their own life is not always true (ibid, 314). Furthermore, methods focused on action do not automatically solve the problems, because teachers lack knowledge and sensitivity about gender differences (ibid, 318).

## **2.5 Christian Boeser: Are Gender-Specific Aspects Relevant for Civic Education?**

*Christian Boeser's* study, which was completed in 2002, dealt with the relevance of gender-specific aspects in civic education. Three methods were combined in this empirical study: four group-interviews of male and female groups of students, qualitative interviews with eight students of each gender and finally, 165 students filled out a quantitative questionnaire twice.

The results of this study show that gender-specific differences exist in different fields. However, the differences of boys and girls often are small and therefore problems caused by gender-specific differences should not be exaggerated.

An interesting finding is that gender-specific differences in favorite topics and methodical preferences during civic education are negligible. Yet, the study showed that clearness of lessons is more important to female than to male students, and furthermore, that female and male students have different political interests. It became clear that more girls than boys have problems relating two topics with each other in civic education. These results are similar to those of physics classes, where it was shown that the context of a topic determines the interest of girls. The authors found out that female students prefer different contexts than male students (see Hoffmann 1997; Hoffmann; Häußler; Lehrke 1998). As a consequence there is a need for experiments which examine the effects of didactic concepts, as for instance proposed by Sibylle Reinhardt or Heidrun Hoppe.

Another important result of the study is that during civic education, female students do not assess their political competence as well as their male colleagues do. Since the feeling about one's own political competence determines the future engagement in politics, the mechanisms described for civic education could cause the gender-specific differences in the behavior of participation (see also Horstkemper 1987; Macha; Forschungsgruppe 2000). Therefore, one must agree with Dagmar Richter and Heidrun Hoppe that the main task of civic education is to encourage especially female students to engage in politics.

### **3. Conclusions**

Altogether, research findings in Germany show that civic education should include gender-specific aspects in theory as well as in practice. On the one hand, it is important in further discussion to consider different levels (meta level, planning level and process level) as proposed by Dagmar Richter. On the other hand, precise didactic conceptions, as described by Sibylle Reinhardt and Heidrun Hoppe, should be realized in empirically-accompanied pilot projects. The focus of scientific accompaniment should thereby be geared to results of previous investigations as done by Karin Kroll and Christian Boeser.

Continued work in this area is deemed necessary, so that stereotyped thinking can be stopped. However, due to the small differences between female and male students it should not be exaggerated. Instead, civic education adequate to both girls and boys should extend competencies and scopes of both genders.

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**Keywords:** civic education, gender, sex, male, female, gender issues, gender-specific socialization, gender-specific differences, empirical investigation, school, Germany, interest in politics